

The City of Lowell

Community Leader Interviews

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Introduction

This summary report is based on a series of one-on-one interviews conducted among city leaders in Lowell, Massachusetts during November and December, 2001. The interviews were either conducted over the telephone, or during a face-to-face meeting. A total of 42 adults participated in these discussions. These participants represent community leaders active across many factions of the city – including education leaders, city government, developers, neighborhood leaders, city service providers, and minority group representatives. Participants were recruited from a list of candidates provided to Davidson-Peterson Associates by Lowell's Division of Planning and Development. Sixty-six community leaders were identified on this list. All were called and asked to participate in the study, and several other community leaders were recommended during the interview process. The 42 contributors represent those both originally named and those later identified.

All participants were asked their perceptions of the city of Lowell and what aspects of the city they like or dislike. They were then asked three important questions:

- What is the most important issue facing Lowell today?
- If you could correct one problem in Lowell today, what would it be?
- What do you think the city will look like twenty years from now?

The purpose of these interviews was for Davidson-Peterson Associates to gain a more full understanding of the issues facing the city of Lowell. This understanding will help us create a resident survey instrument designed to obtain public perceptions of the city.

Further, they will provide a richness to the resident survey, enabling us to compare and contrast resident sentiment to community leader views.

As with all qualitative research, care should be taken in using the findings and conclusions reported here. No statistical inferences should be drawn from the results of these discussions.

Key Findings Summary

- Overwhelmingly, community leaders discussed a general feeling that Lowell has done well compared to other similar cities, and that the image of the city has improved considerably over the last ten years. Specifically, they discussed the city's progressive development, such as the arena, ballpark and new schools. This development has led to an increased sense of pride and optimism regarding the city.
- However, several community leaders relayed that the resident image of Lowell differs by neighborhood, ethnic group and socio-economic status. Specifically, those in more upscale neighborhoods have a more positive view of the city, while perceptions among those in more downscale areas remains more negative.
- Many community leaders discussed the ethnic vitality of the city. They feel that the immigrant populations and racial diversity in Lowell add positively to its image. However, several community leaders interviewed believe that a lack of representation of Lowell's minority peoples is the most important issue facing the city today. Several of those interviewed acknowledged an undercount of minority peoples in Lowell, and believe mono-lingualism to be a profound issue in the city.
- Several community leaders we spoke with are fairly impressed with the education system in Lowell. They feel that the universities located in Lowell do much to improve the community. Several also feel that Lowell's primary schools have made great strides and offer many benefits to students – such as diversity, breadth of classes, a strong sports program, and improved physical facilities. Conversely, issues in Lowell's primary schools were mentioned by other community leaders as a key dislike in the city.
- Despite strides made in improving Lowell's downtown over the last decade, many community leaders mentioned their dissatisfaction with the condition of the downtown area. While overall they are pleased with the improvements that have

been made in recent years, they also wish for the momentum to continue and for the downtown area to be more fully developed. Specifically, they are looking for more retail businesses (shops, restaurants, etc.), for an increase in housing in the downtown area and for perhaps additional creative solutions (such as the artist's loft concept) to create interest in the downtown. Finally, they communicated a desire for more "energy" in the downtown area, evidenced by later shop hours and more "bustle" later into the evening.

- Many of those interviewed mentioned dislike for the "politics" evident in Lowell. They feel that those in power lack diversity and at times inhibit progress. Further, several interviewed believe that Lowell lacks the vision it once had. They feel that a defined strategic plan and direction is needed to continue Lowell's progress. Specifically, they wish that Lowell's leaders and residents would work together more cooperatively, inclusively and creatively.
- Housing was mentioned often as a factor of dislike in the city. However, the housing needs brought up differed – from needing more low-income housing, to improving the condition of existing housing, to renovating mill buildings to provide upscale riverfront housing.
- Many of those interviewed are dismayed by the traffic situation in Lowell. Specifically, they are frustrated by the traffic in the downtown area, and getting across town, given bridge bottlenecks. Related to the congested downtown area were complaints about parking availability and signage in the downtown area.
- Several leaders also expressed dismay for the condition of routes into and out of the city. They feel that they are confusing, poorly marked and lack some of the beautification/development that has occurred in much of the city. Hence, they believe that Lowell's gateways do not reflect the "new and improved" Lowell.
- Many community leaders communicated their dislike for Lowell's high density and wish for stronger zoning enforcement/laws to improve the conditions in "tighter"

neighborhoods. They see a key way to improve the city overall is to concentrate at the neighborhood level, relieving some of the pressures associated with high density, such as parking, absentee landlords and overcrowded housing units.

- Community leaders are concerned that recent economic events will have a detrimental effect on the city's plans for continued economic development. Also, they expressed a desire for the city to be more assertive in obtaining additional funding (i.e., grants) and in helping the neighborhoods obtain grants. A minority of leaders mentioned the fiscal drain expected from correcting Lowell's combined sewer overflows.
- As a final question, many of the community leaders interviewed were asked to communicate their "vision" for what they think the City of Lowell will look like in twenty years. Almost without exception, they hold an optimistic outlook for the City. They believe that continued improvement will be seen here. However, these community leaders are somewhat varied in what their definition of improvement is. To some, Lowell will become more like Newburyport, with an increase in historic charm and tourist appeal. To others, Lowell will stay closer to its industrial roots and offer an improved lifestyle and economic stability to those who have traditionally lived here. In other words, there appears to be a disparity among community leaders as to whether Lowell will remain a more "blue-collar" community, or become more upscale in future years.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Several clear themes arose from these interviews with Lowell's community leaders.

These themes fall into the following areas:

- Continued Development
- Housing
- City Leadership
- Pride in the City
- Traffic/Roads/Parking
- Immigrant/Diversity Issues
- Funding
- Schools
- Clash of Core Values

As we move forward to understand the public opinion of Lowell residents, Davidson-Peterson Associates must compare resident's attitudes to those of the city's leadership. Along with other resident issues (such as city services, parks, etc.) we will strive to understand the following from Lowell's residents:

Continued Development

- Degree of interest in more restaurants, stores, etc. in downtown
- Downtown versus neighborhood development
- Desire to develop unused/marginal use properties
- Desire for continued renovation of mill buildings
- Importance of city beautification
- Are more retail businesses wanted in downtown and at neighborhood hubs?
- Is a retail "hub," such as a mall, desired?
- Continued job creation and economic development

Housing

- Importance of affordable housing options
- Position on density versus green space trade-off
- Desire for more upscale waterfront housing

City Leadership

- Level of satisfaction with city government

Pride in the City

- Do residents hold the same degree of pride in Lowell as do community leaders?

Traffic/Roads/Parking

- Design of gateways to city
- Downtown traffic issues
- Bridge conditions
- Parking availability
- Condition of roads in the city

Immigrant/Diversity Issues

- Representation
- Met/unmet needs

Funding

- Effort put against grant applications
- Tax situation
- Allocation of city funding

Schools

- Attitude toward Lowell's primary and secondary schools

Clash of Core Values

- Should Lowell keep itself blue collar, or become more like Newburyport?

Detailed Findings

Image of the City

Image Among Those Who Live in Lowell

Overwhelmingly, community leaders discussed a general feeling that Lowell has done well compared to other similar cities, and that the image of the city has improved considerably over the last ten years. Specifically, they discussed the city's progressive development, such as the arena, ballpark and new schools. This development has led to an increased sense of pride and optimism regarding the city.

"Why ever go to Boston?"

"It is a wonderful city that is on the upswing. Ever-evolving. The city has had its ups and downs over last 150 years. But now it is vibrant and a nice place to be."

"A resurgence has happened in Lowell."

"Residents have a good image of the city. They see the city as improving over the last few years."

"Residents over the last 10 years have developed pride for their city."

"Lowell has a history of progressive development."

"It is well-managed, heading in a positive direction. For example, the arena was built."

"Now it is one of pride and a sense of opportunity."

"Core of people have a new pride in the city, because in the 50's-70's it was a textile area "not a place where you'd want to live." Now, we are past that and have shown that we can do things we didn't think we could do. We had great political leadership and the backing/vision of Paul Tsongas."

"Lowell benefited tremendously from some federal funding that was available at the time to refurbish older cities. Now we have canals, ballparks, theatre, and a promising high school."

"The city is run excellently right now. Financially, the city is sound. It's headed in the right direction. It has a lot of different things. The future is good."

"The HS is doing a better job. There is no image of the education being bad because it's urban."

Many community leaders also discussed the ethnic vitality of the city. They feel that the immigrant populations and racial diversity in Lowell add positively to its image.

"The immigrant population makes it stronger. Most immigrant populations are immediately employable – they don't want to be on public assistance. They want to be productive and add to the fiber of the community."

"It's a good "starter" city – immigrants historically have come here."

"The ethnic groups have blended well – it's an "all American city."

"We have greater acceptance of multicultural populations versus 20 years ago. Now it's a good thing. The prejudice is gone {for most}."

However, several community leaders relayed that the resident image of Lowell differs by neighborhood, ethnic group and socio-economic status. Specifically, those in more upscale neighborhoods have a more positive view of the city, while perceptions among those in more downscale areas remains more negative.

“Among residents the image of Lowell varies greatly. Those who live in Belvidere see no problems in the city and nothing is really wrong. Depends on where you fall on the economic continuum...”

“For residents, Lowell is depressed.”

“Also, they see the city does have a few problems. We do have crime and poor people.”

“They {minority groups} don’t think about the city of Lowell as a community. They think about their own personal community only. The minority groups have no representation in mainstream society.”

“High income are very happy but would probably like to see things more upscale. Middle income will complain about taxes. Low income... the eco-boom didn’t change their lives. They still stayed poor. They feel powerless so things don’t change for them.”

“But there’s a segment of the city that views it as being dead. This segment is mostly the elderly and those with fixed incomes.”

“Residents do know that Downtown has changed and that something is happening in the Acre. But most people never participate in the political process.”

Image of the City Among Those Who Do Not Live or Work in Lowell

In general, community leaders feel that non-residents still hold a traditional view of Lowell, as being an old, urban, crime-ridden mill town. They also believe that outsiders hold a negative view of the immigrant population in Lowell.

"The perception is that Lowell is an old, urban, mill town that is dark and dingy."

"Lots of crime and immigrants, not a nice city."

"For non-residents they still see Lowell as a crime-ridden old mill town."

"The city has had its bad knocks – about crime, whatever. It also has a bad perception because of the immigrants. Native Americans {Caucasians} think that it {diversity} drags down the city."

"Outside the city, people confuse Lowell with Lawrence. They believe Lowell is still a run-down mill town."

"People still think of Lowell as a working class, blue collar city, and a center of immigration."

"For non-residents the image that pops to mind is violence and crime. Lowell is a place they would never move to."

"People outside of Lowell still perceive it as a dangerous, crime-ridden city, and even though they visit the theater or a concert, they still feel that once the show is over that they have to flee the city because it's too dangerous."

"Suburban people are coming in for the Spinners games and see how nice Lowell's downtown is, but then they quickly leave after the game because they believe the city is not safe."

"Among non-residents, those who live farther away have a more positive image of Lowell than people who live within a 25-mile radius do."

However, many leaders believe that the perceptions of non-residents are improving. Further, they believe that non-residents who visit the city are often surprised to see the city's improvements.

"When people see the city for themselves, they are shocked by where the city has come from."

"But the people who have visited the city realize that something is happening in the city. Lots of things have changed and improved. The strategy of being a destination city—more parks, the Arena, the ballpark, the folk festival—is working."

"But there are differences among non-residents. Those people who visit from a distance have a more positive view of Lowell than people who live in the more affluent communities in the region."

"In the past, many who traveled to Lowell were relieved they weren't mugged. Now issues aren't what they thought they were."

"Non-residents—they have some perception that this is a city trying to improve itself."

"The housing market is good – prices are way up. The perception is changing."

"It used to be that others thought that Lowell was full of crime. At one time there was a stigma... But they just didn't understand us. Programs and grants have removed the blighted areas. It is now the "metro" North of Boston."

"People from the outside keep saying that a lot is going on in Lowell. They then cite all the new public city structures. People believe that Lowell manages to change things and that the city is tough and resilient."

"Among non-residents the view has improved. Tourists now come to the city to see the attractions and there's a more positive image of the community."

"In the surrounding towns the image of the city is that it has improved a lot in the last few years. But some people never come into the city. They are never attracted to the city."

"However, this perception is changing dramatically to the good. Over the last years, we've added the baseball park, the arena, Merrimack Theatre, the reputation of Umass Lowell. This overshadows the bad PR."

Positive Aspects of the City

Aspects Liked the Most

Several community leaders we spoke with are fairly impressed with the education system in Lowell. They discussed how a resident can begin in preschool and finally get a P.H.D., without ever leaving town. They feel that the universities located in Lowell do much to improve the community. Several also feel that Lowell's primary schools have made great strides and offer many benefits to students – such as diversity, breadth of classes, a strong sports program, and improved physical facilities.

“The University and Community college provide quality and convenient post-secondary education in Lowell.”

“You can go from K to PhD here in Lowell.”

“University base is terrific. The University Chancellor is paying a lot of attention to Umass Lowell.”

“Lots of dollars were spent on building sports facilities for HS sports.”

“The public schools have improved over the last 10 years. \$100 million dollars has been spent on building new schools and capital improvements to the education system of Lowell.”

“Enormous educational base – community college, UMASS and private college. This provides a well-educated base from which to recruit knowledgeable staff.”

Community leaders also feel that *their* relationships affect the city positively. Specifically, they discussed how committed the political leadership is in the city, and how well public and private interests work together to achieve a common good.

“Lowell has good private/public partnerships. The city has worked well together.”

“Very responsive private/public partnerships. All work in unison for the benefit of the city. They have the best interest of the city in mind.”

“The direction the city is running right now.”

“Our city managers live in Lowell and do an excellent job.”

“People in government have fights but we have good ideas and we work things out.”

“Business Leaders are giving back (such as George Barakas, Demoulas, etc.).”

“We have an assertive city council.”

“We have strong political and educational leadership.”

“There is a willingness for partners to work together and get things done. You can get something done in Lowell and see the results most of the time.”

“The city does a good job of managing itself.”

"We are moving in the right direction. Good people to work within the city government."

"like John Cox. He's open to everyone, unlike previous administrations."

Many of the community leaders interviewed believe that the recent (last ten years) economic development in the city has been very beneficial. They are proud of this development, and would like to see it continue.

"...the most important positive aspects of the city are the economic development that occurred in the last 10 years. This includes LeLacheur Park for the Lowell Spinners, the Tsongas Arena, and the NYNEX (now Verizon) move into the old Wang towers. The NYNEX move was just the beginning of the re-development of the CrossPoint Towers."

"...economic development of the Acre, East Merrimack corridor, and the Middlesex corridor."

"The city has a good reputation for doing things to improve itself."

"The downtown area – the buildings are being refurbished, restaurants added, etc."

"The Wang towers are now developed."

"They have been successful with some major projects – Tsongas Arena, the baseball park, the national park, the schools (UMASS and Middlesex)."

"Smaller projects have also been successful. The planning department is good to work with and helps facilitate projects that are going to be good for the city."

Community leaders also stressed how the diversity of the population in Lowell is a clear asset to the community. This diversity makes Lowell the "All American City" – a true microcosm of the world.

"We have a strong diversity of people and the government deals with it well."

"Lowell has diversity and looks like the real world."

"Sheltering community."

"Welcomes everyone of any background. The people make you feel comfortable." "The ability to experience so many cultures, languages, food, and events."

"The ethnic diversity of Lowell is a real strength for the city."

"Diversity—racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity."

"The diversity of the city is one positive aspect of living in Lowell. This diversity reflects the slower process that is happening all over America."

"{What is} Working is Lowell with all its diversity—diversity is its strength."

Another positive aspect of the city mentioned frequently was the diversity of activities available in the city. Residents have true options for entertainment here.

"We have so much to do – whatever you want, you can find it here."

"The new amenities are positive, such as baseball, Tsongas arena."

“Entertainment opportunities, such as the rep theatre.”

“The new city structures and festivals—ballpark, arena, parks, fields, festivals, and everything else. Sport events, cultural activities, and concerts in the various parks.”

“Wonderful restaurants.”

“Always something going on, a dynamic and convenient downtown.”

Several community leaders also believe that the strength of Lowell’s neighborhoods add positively to the city. While Lowell is technically defined a city, the closeness and tight-knit nature of its individual communities give it a “friendliness” not found in all cities.

“Neighborhoods are strong (quality/upkeep).”

“The number and diversity of neighborhoods is a positive aspect of Lowell. They are beautiful, nice places to live with lots of character.”

“Don’t see extremes in incomes here as you do in other communities. The poor are not too poor and the rich tend to live simply here in Lowell so you don’t see such disparity between groups.”

“Small community so you get to know everyone. This gives some feeling of being able to effect change.”

“For a big city it seems to be able to maintain a “small-town” feel.”

“The neighborhood organizations are a real strength.”

“People are friendly.”

A few community leaders feel that the low crime rate in Lowell is a positive aspect of the community.

“Don’t see much crime.”

“Low crime rate. People feel safe.”

“Neighborhood policing – the cops pressure on foot cools things down.”

“Non-threatening, safe place to live.”

A few community leaders also discussed how Lowell is more affordable than Boston or even other surrounding towns in Northern Massachusetts.

“Good property tax rates.”

“Cheap...”

“...place where people with limited resources can stay – a lot of non-profits that help.”

“A young couple moving to the city would find it more affordable than the surrounding towns and suburbs—around \$100,000 less.”

Several people interviewed mentioned Lowell’s rich history as adding a positivity to its perception today. Today, this rich history physically manifests itself into beautiful architecture, streetscapes, historic parks and refurbished mill buildings.

“Architecture is phenomenal. I love the old mill cities – what they’ve done with the streetscapes. It’s a compact city – you can park downtown and walk the entire downtown.”

“Beautiful, historic parks. For example, Tyler park.”

“Working class history—rich history, a real middle class community.”

A few leaders mentioned that recent development efforts have not only led to economic development, but to beautification of the city and to the creation of a cleaner city.

“Lowell is a cleaner place – the parks department is doing an excellent job

“flowering the city” with attractive playgrounds and parks.”

“clean, “nice” city”

“Beautification has really helped improve the city over the last 10 years.”

Community leaders also told us of the deep love and respect that residents have for the city. With this love comes a determination to make the city “work.” Given Lowell’s history, this has also driven an openness for trial, and willingness to effect change.

“People are determined to make life here work. There is a depth and love for this city and an interest in making this work. There is a willingness to effect change. “

“Lowell is a place where people can test things out – social change.”

Benefits to Living/Working in Lowell

When asked specifically about what are the benefits to living and/or working in Lowell, many of those interviewed mentioned their relationships with city government.

“Planning Department and City Hall have an open door policy. Just need to convince residents that this is the case. You get to know the people here. They always help you out. You’re not such a stranger here.”

“Many of the people who work here also live here. They have a vested interest in the community.”

“Great cooperation from the city departments and staff. They (planning, engineers) have a spirit of cooperation in doing their job. There is a sense of pride in the city. In other towns, the developer is the enemy – here the city welcomes developing and increasing its tax base.”

“Wonderful police. Community police system is good.”

“Communication in the city is great. Any department is great – you don’t have to know somebody to get something done.”

Once again, community leader mentioned the plethora of cultural and sporting events as being a benefit for them living in the city.

“In addition to the cultural events here, there are also facilities to support sports events, which adds a tremendous draw for people.”

“Baseball, hockey, museums. A lot of the things that are in Boston are here. Most cities our size don’t have so much to offer.”

Finally, several leaders mentioned Lowell’s convenience to major roadways as being a benefit to living and/or working in the city.

“The city is easy to get to connector/495/Rte 3. “

“Convenience -- 3 major highways accessible within a mile. Close to the ocean, close to Boston...”

“Wonderful transportation system.”

Beneficial Features of the City

When asked what benefits of the city they would bring forward to someone considering Lowell as a new home or workplace, community leaders mentioned many of the positive aspects previously noted, such as its sense of community, its school system, affordability, safety and city services.

Community Values

"The city is moving away from a mill town to a service community. It is no longer blue collar. The banking and medical industries are strong. However, we don't want to tarnish the blue collar/grass roots of the community."

"Blend of old and new- old culture and new amenities"

"We are all one family" – caring within the city."

Affordability

"Property values (can get a lot for your dollar)"

"Residential tax rate is good."

"The first time buyer home program has sold 400 homes over the past 4 years."

"You get more house for your money in Lowell."

Schools

"School system..."

"Good school system. It's excellent – all new schools."

"High quality of education – you can get a doctorate without leaving the city."

Safety

"Safe community ..."

"Crime is way down."

City Services

"There are good city services, a good fire department, street department, etc. They take immediate action when there's a problem."

Negative Aspects of the City

Aspects Liked Least

Many community leaders mentioned their dissatisfaction with the condition of the downtown area. While overall they are pleased with the improvements that have been made in recent years, they also wish for the momentum to continue and for the downtown area to be more fully developed. Specifically, they are looking for more retail businesses (shops, restaurants, etc.), for an increase in housing in the downtown area and for perhaps additional creative solutions (such as the artist's loft concept) to create interest in the downtown. Finally, they communicated a desire for more "energy" in the downtown area, evidenced by later shop hours and more "bustle" later into the evening.

"Downtown business area could be improved aesthetically."

"The central business district needs to be further developed."

"The downtown area could be more attractive, with more shops, restaurants, businesses open into the night."

"Downtown still doesn't cater to the 20 or 30-somethings. Need a stronger retail base."

"Has good restaurants but not good retail. Need discount stores as well as higher-end retail (maybe something like the Gap, etc.)."

Specific comments were mentioned regarding the retail situation in Lowell. While many mentioned desiring more retail establishments in the downtown area, some desire more effective retail "hubs" in the neighborhoods.

"Need retail districts like in Newton. In Newton everyone can walk to their retail district and get most of what they need. Not so in Lowell. In fact, Belvedere doesn't even have a retail district at all."

Many of those interviewed mentioned dislike for the "politics" evident in Lowell. They feel that those in power lack diversity and at times inhibit progress. Further, several feel that the minority populations in Lowell are not adequately represented by the current government.

"In-fighting among some of the major players is detrimental to the community."

"Old families/constituencies want to maintain control. This inhibits growth and development."

"The political nature and undercurrent is what I like least about Lowell – everyone one has to be a winner. It's just profound."

"Every city has its politics and Lowell probably has less of that than 95% of others but this does create some conflict (red tape)."

"Newspaper has way too much influence on the way the city is run..."

"The 'good ole' boys' are coming back into power in Lowell."

“There is no diversity in the power structure of Lowell.”

“More women in visible leadership may also help.”

The minority groups have no voice in the mainstream society of Lowell.

Leading bodies do not reach out to mono-lingual groups. The government is so out-of-touch with “reality.”

“City needs to be more fair in their distribution of money – they currently do not allocate money proportionally.”

“Lowell has been open to people of all ethnic backgrounds but a lot of minorities do not have a voice.”

“On some level there’s been an acceptance of the new immigrants. But like any place, there’s a network of decision-makers and this network is not very open. There’s a point of view in the community that thinks along these lines: we have poor people, we have immigrants, and refugees. What we need to do is attract richer people.”

Several of those interviewed acknowledged an undercount of minority peoples in Lowell, and believe mono-lingualism to be a profound issue in the city.

“People in the immigrant communities do not trust government so they are always undercounted.”

“Services are not accessible by non-English speaking people and ½ the population of the City is not English speaking.”

“Language barriers. The city needs more ESL programs.”

“The city needs more ESL programs. All new funding for these programs has ended. Currently there are classes held but not many and not at convenient times. This effort needs to take place in the schools too. ESL is not just for adults.”

Several interviewed believe that Lowell lacks the vision it once had. They feel that a defined strategic plan and direction is needed to continue Lowell’s progress.

“Presently a lack of focus in the department is hurting at every level. No one is trained to be a planner. We used to have creative guys from Cambridge.”

“We suffer recently from a lack of innovation. We’re losing momentum.

People are running around, but need to focus.”

“Now is a real good opportunity to do something in the city. There is a lack of vision and that the city needs a real master plan.”

Housing was mentioned often as a factor of dislike in the city. However, the housing needs brought up differed – from needing more low-income housing, to improving the condition of existing housing, to renovating mill buildings to provide upscale riverfront housing.

“Renovate the mill buildings for residential purposes.”

“People are looking for housing along the river – need a thoughtful process to make it happen.”

"Lack of affordable housing."

"The housing stock needs to be improved and expanded."

"Housing, housing, and more housing."

"The housing stock of Lowell must be improved."

Many of those interviewed are dismayed by the traffic situation in Lowell. Specifically, they are frustrated by the traffic in the downtown area, and getting across town, given bridge bottlenecks.

"But need to address the traffic/road situation."

"Traffic issues downtown are a problem."

"Need better planning downtown in terms of cars. How do we deal with all of the cars?"

"Traffic congestion."

"Traffic downtown is bad – Merrimack St./Johnson St."

"Some of the roads are too narrow."

"Traffic patterns are also an issue."

"Bridges – an inherent bottleneck problem. If they could get the state to replace the temporary bridge with a permanent structure, that would help. However, I don't think they are doing that."

"We need 4 to 5 more bridges across the Merrimack."

Related to the congested downtown area were complaints about parking availability and signage in the downtown area.

"Parking downtown is not bad, but not perfect. Perhaps it could be communicated better."

"There is decent parking but still have parking issues."

Several leaders also expressed dismay for the condition of routes into and out of the city. They feel that they are confusing, poorly marked and lack some of the beautification/development that has occurred in much of the city. Hence, they believe that Lowell's gateways do not reflect the "new and improved" Lowell.

"Main access into the city could be improved. Moving around from 3/495/connector – maybe better signage. Left on Gorham St. could be worked better to be more inviting."

"Need more on/off ramps at 495/Gorham St. Need a new feeder at Chelmsford/Rte 3."

"Not a good connection from highways to highways."

"Lowell has never fixed its entranceways to the city—Thorndike, Chelmsford, and Rogers street. Improved signs around the city would help."

Many community leaders communicated their dislike for Lowell's high density and wish for stronger zoning enforcement/laws to improve the conditions in "tighter"

neighborhoods. They see a key way to improve the city overall is to concentrate at the neighborhood level.

"They are overcome with density issues."

"Zoning problems—lots being split into postage stamp size. This just contributes to more parking and housing problems."

"Triple-storied apartment blocks should be thinned out and the density broken up. For example, the Julianne Steel housing project. Housing codes must be enforced better."

"Better code enforcement is also needed."

"Get absentee landlords out of the mix."

"There is no green space in this neighborhood."

"There should be a limit on the density of zoning in neighborhoods like the Highlands."

"New immigrants, mostly southeast Asians, were receiving waivers from the city and allowed to build on lots where there wasn't enough space."

"We need to continue to improve the neighborhoods."

"How do we make the current Lower Highlands into a vibrant China Town like in Boston?"

While almost all community leaders discussed the desire for additional economic development, a few specifically wish for more industrial development.

"Would like more industry – more high tech as feeders from university."

"Need more businesses in more industrial base."

Some expressed dismay at the continuing "mill town" perception of Lowell by the outsiders.

"Still seen as an old mill town."

"Our proximity to Lawrence is a problem. We are not at all like our 'sister' city Lawrence. That city is in a completely different place than us."

Issues in Lowell's primary schools were mentioned by some community leaders as a key dislike in the city.

"School system – needs a lot of work; MCAT scores are down; Drop out rate in high school is one of the highest in the state."

"Kids are on the street by the high school – elderly...are afraid of them."

"The school system does not stand as a draw to bring people into the city."

Community leaders are concerned that recent economic events will have a detrimental effect on the city's plans for continued economic development. Also, they expressed a desire for the city to be more assertive in obtaining additional funding (i.e., grants) and in helping the neighborhoods obtain grants.

“Now that the economy is weaker, Lowell’s tax rate will once again be an issue.”

“...worried about the economy and how this affects tax receipts and aid from the state. Ninety percent of Lowell’s funding is from the state, and when Massachusetts is doing badly, so too are the towns and cities.”

“Most of the big capital improvement projects are now on hold. The new courthouse is on hold.”

“The economy—Lowell needs more jobs—and parking in the Downtown.”

“Can the city maintain momentum during an economic downturn? The city can never afford to rest—it must continue to work.”

“The city needs to think of more ingenious ways to get money. Money should come from grants – don’t hit businesses and residents up for the money. The city government and community organizations need to work together on these grants.”

A minority of leaders mentioned the fiscal drain expected from correcting Lowell’s combined sewer overflows. They are concerned about how the city will pay for meeting this regulation.

“Another major issue facing the city is the Combined Sewer Overflows.”

Some of the community leaders interviewed expressed complaints with city services.

“Need more policing – community policing specifically.”

“Need more health department programs to help the residents improve their situations.”

“Getting services. “Extra” services such as cleaning streets, paving roads. The downtown area is well taken care of, which is good, but they need more in the neighborhoods.”

“Need to make healthcare available outside the downtown area – need to reach the health arm out to the neighborhoods.”

“City Council needs to address the policing issue.”

Others questioned how much in the way of services Lowell should be responsible for.

“How much can and should Lowell support?”

“The state and the region expect that because you are an urban center, Lowell should provide for all the social services, affordable housing, and everything else. The Urban Center problem. What is our responsibility to bear this burden? The community and the region should bear this problem, not just Lowell.”

Frustrating Aspects of Living/Working in Lowell

When asked what aspects of the city they find “frustrating,” most community leaders interviewed reiterated the topics they dislike about the city: such as traffic, parking, street conditions, lack of downtown redevelopment, etc.

“My frustration is that Lowell is not living up to its potential.”

Traffic, Transportation, Parking and Road Condition Frustrations

“The traffic – at night coming home. The bridges at University Ave. and Pawtucket Street – it’s difficult to get across at night.”

“The traffic – getting from one end of the city to another.”

“Have to plan day around traffic.”

“Need good parking facilities in the downtown area strategically located.”

“Offstreet parking – not enough or not well marked.”

“Like to see more money allocated to fixing up the streets. They have been on the list for the past 8 or 9 years to have their streets paved but they have not been paved.”

“Public transportation is not sufficient in the city. Buses stop at 6:30 and work off a hub-and-spoke system that isn’t efficient.”

“Parking is too difficult. Parking is a major issue – if you read about a murder, chances are it was over parking.”

Further Development of the Downtown

“Keeping a mixed income portfolio in the downtown.”

“Downtown – vacant stores need to be filled. Need to get more people to invest in the city. For example, Artist space – it’s a good idea, I’d like to see more of it. We need more retail/more restaurants.”

“Residents have to be convinced to come downtown.”

Housing Issues

“It is an expensive city for tenants vs. homeowners.”

“Need to mix income housing and mix use especially in the downtown area.”

“The housing authority is trying to develop affordable housing in the surrounding areas but how do you get people to work and how do you get child care for these people?”

“Lack of affordable housing.”

Most Important Issue Facing Lowell Today

Several community leaders interviewed believe that a lack of representation of Lowell's minority peoples is the most important issue facing the city today. However, others feel that city government represents all groups well.

"Non-English speaking community has no representation, no voice in the city. The City does not support this group of residents. There needs to be more services offered including interpreters to help non-English speaking residents in all aspects of city government."

"The under-representation of non-English speaking people in the mainstream society of Lowell."

"The government is so out of touch with the community. They need to reach out more."

"The city needs people who are qualified for the positions to be in control – not the buddy system that is coming back into play."

"Residents vote for the City Council so their voice is heard by the representatives they choose."

The high commercial tax rate (as compared to state averages) is seen by some to truly hamper economic development in the city. Those interviewed also view the current residential tax rate (which is relatively low) to be a benefit for the city – they don't want this to go up.

"Tax rate – keeping it down; while it's average now, housing valuations have gone up. Surrounding towns have very high taxes – don't want that to happen to Lowell."

"Need to continue to give tax breaks to bring in more businesses."

"Tax rates – commercial tax rates are not competitive."

"Commercial tax rate too high (highest in the state)."

Separately, some community leaders expressed concern with how Lowell is going to manage financially, given the downturn in the economy and its sewer overflow issue.

"Economic development – at the best of times they could not fill the downtown."

"Economic stability given the current times. She has seen Lowell at its worst and doesn't want to go back there."

"Sustaining its current economic structure of small businesses. Keeping them viable. This needs to continue."

"Infrastructure – underground utilities issue."

A notable portion of those interviewed believe that the lack of a distinct housing policy will harm the long term health of the city. They desire specific codes for what

the density in certain communities should be and then enforcement of those codes. Ultimately, they desire improvement and beautification at the neighborhood level.

“Lack of housing policy right now. Need a long-term plan.”

“Need to address housing. This issue and the downtown issue go hand in hand.”

“To have economic development downtown, you need mix-income housing downtown.”

“Jam Plan” got rid of slum housing. It needs to be completed in the downtown area.”

“Need a coherent housing policy for the city. This has to include an economic development component to make it work.”

“Furthermore, they were taking old single family homes and cutting them up into apartment buildings, and paving over green space and lawns for parking. These group homes don’t pay the same kind of taxes that they do. And the Asians live in these apartments with three and four families creating even more problems.”

“Zoning. The number one issue.”

“More green space that preserves the quality of life in Lowell.”

“Stable neighborhoods is what it is all about—good code enforcement—street trees are also important.”

“Need to “set the bar high.” Lowell can be the best middle-aged city in the country. Need support from neighborhoods – they must be successful.”

“City needs to look at neighborhood associations and figure out how to include them.”

“The Neighborhood Services should offer consulting services for the neighborhood associations to help them grow. The Neighborhood Services dept. could offer organizational support.”

“Continue to support neighborhood associations with expertise and money.

“Want restrictions on what is allowed in the neighborhoods.”

Several leaders discussed specific needs in the social service arena as needing immediate focus.

“Domestic violence rate is high even among white residents. The city does not provide adequate resources for this problem.”

“Need to increase the number of police.”

“Need to actively enforce the statute pertaining to sanitation.”

“City services are not good, specifically public safety. Police need to be left alone to do their job.”

As mentioned before, community leaders are very supportive of continuing development in the city. They feel that the continuation of this development is a key issue for the city today.

“Lowell should continue to upgrade parks, build schools, upgrade fields and stadiums.”

“Proper development of remaining lands – don’t know if current ordinances and bilaws address the nuances of these properties.”

“How much development is enough?”

“Need to link the downtown development with the parks and the river area.”

“Lowell should create a Tanner Street Economic Development Corporation to push for cleaning the Super Fund site, and for developing the under-used and ill-used land on and around Tanner Street.”

“Finally, historic preservation of Downtown will remain important. This preserves the character of Lowell’s downtown, its real working class neighborhoods, which makes Lowell special.”

“As a city, Lowell competes with the “burbs”. To stay healthy, Lowell “we have to appeal to the middle class.” Unlike Lawrence, the city of Lowell has a middle class.”

Magic Wand – If You Could Change One Thing About Lowell...

After discussing all of the positives and negatives they hold for the city, community leaders were asked a “magic wand” question: “If you could change one thing about Lowell, what would it be?”

Rather than choosing “concrete” improvements the city could make, such as paving roads or building bridges, several of those interviewed chose a “softer” change – a changing of attitudes. Specifically, they wish that Lowell’s leaders and residents would work together more cooperatively, inclusively and creatively.

“I’d work on the attitude here among all – residents and community leaders. Change confrontational attitude that people have. It’s disconcerting.”

“Political hotbed here – highly charged. This does turn away some potential businesses and residents. Lowell known as “tough politics.”

“There should be more input from residents and various stakeholders. Furthermore, a better mechanism or structure {is needed} to tie all these elements together.”

“There is a lack of coordination among the movers and shakers of Lowell.”

“Define a vehicle to bring all the players together. Reaching out and listening to stakeholders is really needed.”

“There is room for various views and ideas.”

“More openness and consensus around issues and the debate would occur within a wider, broader, community of decision makers.”

Many, “in a perfect world,” would like to see the traffic patterns around and through Lowell improved, with an improved condition of roads and increase in downtown parking.

“Traffic Pattern – Take out homes to make a more user friendly traffic pattern around city (look at Samson Connector and Gorham St. Connector).”

“Traffic flow. The flow and the signage can be difficult.”

“Improve traffic through the city and specifically the Lowell Connector...where the Connector comes into the city can be very frustrating for those that do not live in the city.”

“Improve parking and traffic flow downtown.”

“Condition of major roads. More paving.”

“Put Mass transit right in the heart of the city for easy access to arena, etc.”

“Gateways to the city are bad roads. This leaves a bad impression on visitors.”

“Dream since this probably could never happen but... would like to see better access to the City off the Lowell Connector.”

“Off-hand—more downtown parking.”

As stated before, community leaders believe that continued economic development, specifically in the downtown area, is crucial. They also want to see consensus on the strategy for continued development of the other neighborhoods in Lowell.

“Perceive that infrastructure already here but would like to see a significant upgrade of retail downtown. At the same time, we need to balance the lower income and ethnic groups downtown – don’t want them to feel pushed out. The retail base therefore needs to be broad based.”

“Refurbish the downtown area.”

“More economic development and a change in non-residents perception of the city.”

“Lawrence Mill Project needs to be done. This is a key project since it is in the heart of the city. Need a residential and commercial mix.”

“Enforce the current zoning laws. No waivers for anyone.”

“The city needs restrictions on what is allowed in neighborhoods.”

Finally, a few community leaders discussed how they wish for a continued emphasis on the “beautification” of the city.

“Need to add trees. “

“Create more green space.”

“Continued improvement of Merrimack River as natural resource.”

Lowell - 20 Years From Now

As a final question, many of the community leaders interviewed were asked to communicate their “vision” for what they think the City of Lowell will look like in twenty years. Almost without exception, they hold an optimistic outlook for the City. They believe that continued improvement will be seen here.

However, these community leaders are somewhat varied in what their definition of improvement is. To some, Lowell will become more like Newburyport, with an increase in historic charm and tourist appeal. To others, Lowell will stay closer to its industrial roots and offer an improved lifestyle and economic stability to those who have traditionally lived here. In other words, there appears to be a disparity among community leaders as to whether Lowell will remain a more “blue-collar” community, or become more upscale in future years.

“The city wouldn’t change that much. We would respect and pay attention to its roots. The city was built on the industrial revolution – we will respect that, yet bring in new commercial and retail base. We would have renovated mill buildings and found new uses for underutilized land. We would expand upon the Artist loft concept – a zoned area for a particular purpose. Creative thinking in the master plan would be used here.”

“The entrance ways into the city are more inviting into the heart of the city.”

“Properties along the edges will be revitalized...Focus on the downtown area. Expand it around the Lowell connector...Consider a retail mall around the Lowell connector – {making it a retail hub}.”

“Newburyport.”

“Like Newburyport. Downtown area is user friendly and open at night.”

“Physically, it is like it is now, only cleaner and brighter. More activity in downtown area. More activity on riverfront. {I} see easy access to downtown mall with the fringes industrial.”

“Lowell becomes an educational and medical center – its strength is in arts and sciences. We expand medical research and development activities. We become a destination outside of Boston.”

“If the city takes full advantage of all the investments made, in 10 years Lowell will have a very bright day and future to follow.”

“Very diverse population; supported arts & education; a balanced tax base between residential and commercial...”

“...the “jewels of the community,” the colleges, are treated as such.”

“Sustain what we have been able to accomplish.”

“Population of Lowell will change. The majority will be Asians and they will be more involved in city government.”

“...Schools will need to improve.”

“...improvement in the DPD...Clean up the trash and the streets...Tree preservation, overall improvement.”

“More jobs in the Greater Lowell Area...local flexibility with the National Park and greater local control for building new development and not just renovating old mills.”

“The last 20 years have set the stage for a very positive, growing Lowell. The magic wand did change resident perceptions of what is possible to dream and build for the city.”

“In 20 years, I want Lowell to be a place where people want to Live.”

“Finally, change the outside perceptions of how people see Lowell. Lowell is a really nice place to live, work, and play.”

“...all our under-utilized space re-developed for attractive use. Also, 2000 more workers in the Downtown area would improve the Downtown area in a dramatic way, especially retail opportunities.”

“See more neighborhood revitalization. Improve the social capital and social structures in the neighborhoods.”

“Make each neighborhood more desirable to live in. Enhance home ownership opportunities, good code enforcement, a mix of incomes, commercial services in neighborhood business districts.”

Appendix A:
Interview Scheduling and Discussion Guides

Lowell, MA -- Phase I

Interviews with key city personnel and community leaders

Interview Scheduling – In-Person Interviews

Hello, this is _____. I am calling from Davidson-Peterson Associates, a marketing research firm. We are working with the City of Lowell Division of Planning and Development on a project designed to explore perceptions and opinions about the city. Results from this study will be used to help guide the city's future development.

I am calling you today because you have been identified as a leader in this community. We will be visiting the community to talk with leaders such as yourself to ask a few questions regarding Lowell. We are estimating that the interviews will take about half an hour to complete. Would you be willing to meet with a representative from our office to share your perceptions and opinions of the City of Lowell?

No – Thank-You for your time

Yes – *Continue below*

We will be in your community on Thursday, November 28th and again on Thursday, December 6th. Does either of these two days work with your schedule?

November 28th – *Check available times, schedule an appointment and confirm address*

December 6th – *Check available times, schedule an appointment and confirm address*

Neither day works – *Schedule a phone interview*

Lowell, MA -- Phase I

Interviews with key city personnel and community leaders

Interview Scheduling –Telephone Interviews

Hello, this is _____. I am calling from Davidson-Peterson Associates, a marketing research firm. We are working with the City of Lowell Division of Planning and Development on a project designed to explore perceptions and opinions about the city. Results from this study will be used to help guide the city's future development.

I am calling you today because you have been identified as a leader in this community. We are contacting leaders such as yourself to set up an appointment for a phone interview. We would like to ask you a few questions regarding Lowell. We are estimating that the interviews will take about half an hour to complete. Would you be willing to talk with a representative from our office to share your perceptions and opinions of the City of Lowell?

No – Thank-You for your time

Yes – *Continue below*

We will be conducting interviews the week of November 26th and December 3rd. Would you be available _____?

Lowell, MA -- Phase I
Interviews with key city personnel and community leaders
Discussion Guide

I am from Davidson-Peterson Associates, a marketing research firm. We are working with the City of Lowell Division of Planning and Development on a project designed to explore perceptions and opinions about the city. Results from this study will be used to help guide the city's future development.

We are talking to people identified as leaders in the community to help us understand a little more about the city of Lowell. I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your opinions of the city of Lowell.

Background/Who are we talking to? (5 minutes)

You are the _____. What does this position entail?

Are you currently a resident of the City of Lowell?

If yes, Where do you live in Lowell?

If no, Where do you currently live?

How long have you been a member of this community?

Image of the City (5 minutes)

What do you think is the perception of the city by those who live in Lowell?

Do you think the perception of Lowell is different for those who do not live or work in the city?

Positive Aspects of the City (10 minutes)

Tell me about some of the aspects of the city that you like the most.

What are some of the benefits to living/working in Lowell?

What features of Lowell would you describe to a person that you were hoping to influence to come live/work here?

Negative Aspects of the City (10 minutes)

Tell me about some of the aspects of Lowell that you like the least.

What are some of the most frustrating aspects of living/working in Lowell?

What do you see as the most important issue facing Lowell today? What can the city of Lowell do to address this issue? Is there anything residents can do to make a difference in regards to this issue?

Closing Question (2 minutes)

If you could change one thing about the city, what would it be?

Questions Specific to Business Owners (5 minutes)

How would you describe the business climate in Lowell?

Tell me about some of the positive aspects of managing a business in Lowell.

Now, tell me about some of the negative aspects of managing a business in Lowell.

What, do you feel, the City of Lowell can do to enhance the business environment in Lowell?

Appendix B:
Interviewee Details

Community Leaders Interviews

Participants

- Peter Aucella, Assistant Superintendent of the National Park
- Bronnie Barry, Cambodian American League of Lowell
- Attny Kevin Broderick, Lowell Planning Board
- Jim Canavan, Executive Director, Community Teamwork Inc.
- Edward Caulfield, City Councilor, Former Mayor
- Thom Clark, CEO, Saints Memorial Medical Center
- Jim Cook, Director, The Lowell Plan
- Jim Cooney, President, Cooney Real Estate
- Carol Cowan, President, Middlesex Community College
- Bob Donovan, President, Lowell General Hospital
- John Dowling, Lieutenant, Lowell Fire Department
- Victoria Fahlberg, Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers
- Victoria Fahlberg, One Lowell Coalition (interviewed twice)
- Matt Fitzpatrick, Board Member, Lowell Chamber of Commerce
- Terry Flahive, President, Princeton Properties
- James Flood, Attorney
- Fred Foust, Chairman of the Board, Lowell Chamber of Commerce
- Rene Gazley, Highlands Neighborhood Association
- Dr. William Hogan, Chancellor, UMASS Lowell
- Richard Howe, City Councilor, Former Mayor of Lowell
- Nancy Judge, Highlands Neighborhood Association
- SamKhann Khoeun, Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association
- David Kronberg, Greater Lowell Community Foundation
- Richard Lockhart, Lowell Planning Board
- Rev. David Malone, Eliot Church
- Bill Martin, City Councilor
- Carol McCarthy, Co-Chair, Sacred Heart Neighborhood Improvement
- Jim Milinazzo, Executive Director, CEO of Lowell Housing Authority
- Barbara Palermo, President, Back Central Neighborhood Association
- Elaine Pantano, Board Member, Riverside Community Group
- Joe Peznola, President, Howe Surveying Associates
- Joey Silavong, Lao Community
- Rita Shah Shaheli, South Asian Women's Network
- Susan Thomson, One Lowell Coalition
- David Turcotte, Center for Family, Work, and Community
- David Turcotte, One Lowell Coalition (interviewed twice)
- Barbara Turner, President, Downtown Neighborhood Association
- Danielle S. Vacarr, Project Assistant, One Lowell
- Kendall Wallace, Publisher, Lowell Sun
- Martha Welch, International Institute of Lowell

Community Leaders Interviews
Participants (Continued)

- Art Williams, Executive Director, Lowell Chamber of Commerce
- Pov Deborah Ye, Cambodian American League of Lowell
- George Zaharoolis, Lowell Planning Board
- Margarita Zapata-Tucotte, La Presna Latina